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CONTROLLING CULTURAL VARIATIONS IN THE PREPARATION OF TESOL MATERIALS.

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ONE OF THE DIFFICULTIES OF PRODUCING ENGLISH SKILLS MATERIALS OR TEACHER-TRAINING MATERIALS FOR SPEAKERS OF OTHER LANGUAGES IS THAT EXTREME VARIATIONS BETWEEN THE STUDENT'S CULTURE AND THE MATERIALS WRITER'S CULTURE CAN CAUSE SERIOUS INTERFERENCE IN COMMUNICATION. A SPEAKER'S VISION IS STRUCTURED BY THE KINDS OF TRAINING, BOTH FORMAL AND INFORMAL (FOLK, POPULAR, MASS MEDIA), WHICH HIS OWN CULTURE PROVIDES. IT MAY LIMIT OR DISTORT HIS OBSERVATION OF THE FOREIGN CULTURE. THE AUTHOR DISCUSSES EDWARD HALL'S TEN "PRIMARY MESSAGE SYSTEMS," (FROM "THE SILENT LANGUAGE," 1959) AND PRESENTS RELEVANT OBSERVATIONS OF AFGHAN CULTURE WHICH ARE AT VARIANCE WITH AMERICAN CULTURE. VARIATIONS BETWEEN THE WRITER'S AND READER'S CULTURES IN ANY SPHERE MAKE THE TASK OF PREPARING MATERIALS MORE DIFFICULT. THE TEACHING MATERIALS MUST BE PRESENTED WITHIN AN EDUCATIONAL PATTERN FAMILIAR, OR AT LEAST UNDERSTANDABLE, TO THE READER. AT THE SAME TIME THEY MUST EMPLOY THE VERBAL OR VISUAL DEVICES NECESSARY TO MAKE COMPREHENSIBLE THE LANGUAGE CONCEPTS SELECTED FOR TEACHING. THEY MUST ALSO RELY ON ILLUSTRATIONS, EXAMPLES, AND VOCABULARY UNDERSTOOD IN THE READER'S REAL EXPERIENCE. THIS ARTICLE APPEARS IN "TESOL QUARTERLY," VOLUME 2, NUMBER 1, MARCH 1968, PUBLISHED BY THE TEACHERS OF ENGLISH TO SPEAKERS OF OTHER LANGUAGES, INSTITUTE OF LANGUAGES AND LINGUISTICS, GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY, WASHINGTON, D.C. 20007. (AUTHOR/AMM)

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Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages

Controlling Cultural Variations in the Preparation of TESOL Materials

Maurice Imhoof

One of the difficulties of producing skills materials or teacher-training materials for speakers of other languages is that extreme variations between the reader's culture and the writer's culture can cause serious interference in communication. Our vision is structured by the kinds of training, both formal and informal (folk, popular, mass media), which our own culture provides. It may limit or distort our observation of the foreign culture.

Ways of Looking at a Culture

The preparation of educational materials which attempt to avoid some of the cultural blocks to comprehension presumes an understanding of the ways of looking at a culture. Edward T. Hall, in a study which views culture as communication with a biological base, lists ten separate kinds of human activity which he labels Primary Message Systems.[1]

These ten systems include:

1. Interaction (Speech is one form of interaction.)
2. Association (ways in which societies and their components are organized or structured)
3. Subsistence
4. Bisexuality
5. Territoriality (space and its use)
6. Temporality (biological and practical and arbitrary)
7. Learning (extended in time and space by language)
8. Play
9. Defense
10. Exploitation (meeting environmental conditions)

The importance of Hall's scheme is that each Primary Message System has a relationship with its adjectival counterpart. *Learning*, for instance, in a few combinations with its counterparts reveals the following organization of some aspects of culture.

1. The interactional aspect of learning: the community lore, or what gets taught and learned.
2. The organizational aspect of learning: the learning groups or educational institutions.
3. The territorial aspect of learning: places for learning.
4. The protective aspect of learning: learning to defend oneself and to stay healthy.[2]

A hundred relationships within the culture, which in fact represent a description of the culture, are developed through the pairing of the message systems and the adjectival counter-

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[1] Edward T. Hall, *The Silent Language* (New York: Doubleday, 1959), p. 53.

[2] *Ibid.*

parts. The comparison of any one of these one hundred relationships with the corresponding relationships within a different culture may reveal variations which cause difficulties in cross-cultural communication. For comparative purposes, statements can be made about American culture in regard to any of the hundred relationships. More importantly, the foreign culture may be studied with these relationships as check points for possible sources of difficulty in respect to language teaching.

A few examples based on experience in preparing TESOL materials for Afghanistan will perhaps show the singular usefulness of such a scheme for checking cultural difficulties.

A study of Afghan culture reveals several aspects of the learning situation which are at variance with American culture. The person preparing learning materials, in order to circumvent some of the cultural conflicts, must have made some of the following observations about the Afghan educational situation.

1. *The interactional aspect of learning.* What gets taught and learned? The Afghan curriculum is very heavy at each grade level. From eleven to fifteen subjects may be studied each week. Subjects are introduced early and carried through several years rather than covered in depth in one year. Religious instruction is continued throughout the entire school attendance. Such an educational situation requires adjustments not only in the amount of material taught, but in the sequencing as well. A part of the interactional aspect of learning may be at odds with the best language-teaching practices currently followed in our culture.

2. *The organizational aspect of learning.* Organization of learning groups in Afghanistan is very similar to the organization of learning groups in American culture—basically, elementary, middle, and secondary; yet other organizations do exist, such as village schools conducted by a religious leader rather than a trained teacher. Religious classes are held in mosques. Although the organization of learning seems superficially similar, the variety of alternate organizations and lack of standardization in the quality of education within the organization limits the commonness of experience of students at a particular grade level. Assumptions as to past experience and knowledge must be made cautiously.

3. *The territorial aspect of learning.* Places for learning are of greater variety than in the American culture. Some facilities are comparable to American schools; others would be considered inadequate in housing, equipment, heating, etc. Many classes are held outdoors. Teaching practices stemming from important language concepts which are incompatible with some of the teaching facilities need continued emphasis.

4. *The protective aspect of learning.* Formal learning in this sense is very similar to American culture. Informal learning may be very different. Tribal people, nomadic people, remote rural people have different cultural patterns.

Implications for Materials Preparation

Observations about the culture are

only important in respect to the degree to which they influence the comprehension of learning materials, however. There is no need to give a complete description of the culture, but rather a need to observe the foreign culture, check the items at variance if they influence the particular set of materials being produced, and apply the necessary controls to the materials.

Vocabulary or semantic problems resulting from cultural variations either have to be replaced or explained. In addition, difficult colloquial styles and unfamiliar rhetorical devices employed by the writer must be adapted to the experience or language skill of the nonnative reader.

Cultural variations are relevant, however, beyond the relatively simple problem of examples or illustrations found in the teaching materials. At least four interrelated spheres affecting the preparation of language materials for future teachers of English may exhibit variables which hamper comprehension.

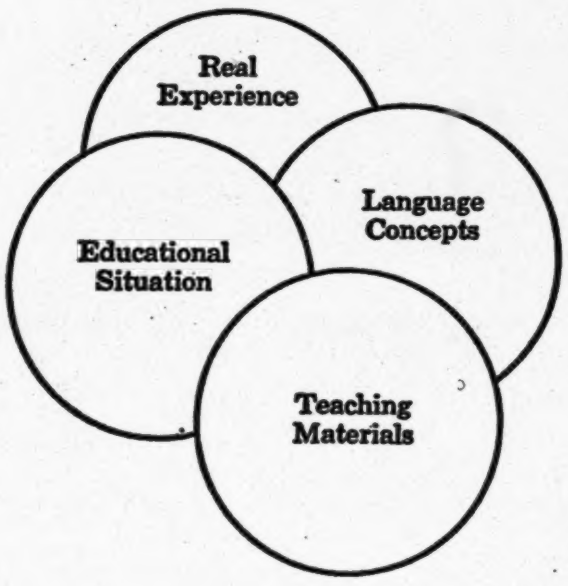
Variations between the writer's and reader's cultures in any sphere make the task of preparing materials more difficult. The teaching materials must be presented within an educational pattern familiar, or at least understandable, to the reader. At the same time, they must employ the devices—verbal or visual—necessary to make comprehensible the language concepts selected for teaching. And above all, they must rely on illustrations, examples, and vocabulary understood in the reader's real experience.

To the language teacher or teacher trainer, the interaction between these four areas means that a decision to write, to revise, or adapt must be weighed against the effect the material will have on the other three areas. The writer, in addition, must guard against his own cultural bias which may lead him to make decisions unhelpful to his reader.

Bereday devotes a long chapter in *Comparative Method in Education* to "The Significance of Cultural Bias" and how bias is reflected in the whole method of comparative studies. His remarks are challenging to the novice student of culture trying to make specific application to the preparation of materials.

> Can such cultural bias be avoided? Probably it cannot, but it can be minimized. Since instructional practices and standards are only just emerging, there is yet no common cultural denominator against which the educational aspirations and actions of the divergent cultures could be accurately judged . . . There remains the fact, however, that the same evidence, even when surveyed by men of similar train-

SPHERES OF CULTURAL VARIATION IN THE PREPARATION OF LANGUAGE TEACHERS



ing and allegiance, appears different from different vantage points.[3]

An added complication is the present necessity of preparing professional teacher-training materials in English, a language which ideally the non-native reader will know well but whose cultural experiences are quite different from the writer's whose native language is English. Fries states the problem thus:

> Our language is an essential part of every portion of our experience; it gets its meaning from our experience, and it is in turn our tool to grasp and realize experience. Every language is thus inextricably bound up with the whole life experience of the native users of that language.[4]

The unhappy alternatives to preparing the materials in English, at least for the present in emerging countries, are to have no professional teacher-training materials at all or to use locally produced translations which are either inadequate or untested.

The necessity of preparing the materials in English and the necessity as well as the limitations of being a cultural observer suggest the following steps in the control of cultural variations which could be employed in the preparation of teacher-training materials by a person knowledgeable about the culture of the learner.

1. Selection of concepts or principles which are held to be relatively universal by experts in the field.
2. An investigation of the writer's treatment of these universal concepts to determine possible areas of cultural conflict using Hall's culture map. (One may be reviewing his own writing or evaluating or adapting the writing of another.)
3. Deletion of non-essential, culturally difficult material.
4. Substitution of more universal examples or illustrations. (It would be pedagogically preferable to use examples from the learner's own culture, but this would limit the usefulness of the materials to one language community or one culture.)
5. Expansion of the writer's cultural examples which are relevant to the study of language concepts in order for the student to make comparisons with his own culture. (For example, it may be necessary to explain the mobility of Americans in order to discuss the coinage of American English words for different types of roads.)

At all times, through the frame of reference of a particular culture or educational situations, the center of attention must be on the important linguistic concepts to be taught and the adaptation of materials suitable for teaching these concepts to the students of that culture.

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[3] George Z. F. Bereday, *Comparative Method in Education* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1964), p. 10.

[4] Charles C. Fries, *Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1945), p. 57.